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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for teachers interested in helping students learn strategies to cope with adolescent problems through writing are presented in this paper. Among the methods discussed for meeting the students' needs for models, self-competence, and peer status are: arranging for professional writers, or the teachers themselves, to share their work with students in the classroom: creating a context for students to write about personal experiences in the form of acrostics, comic strips, and concrete poetry: and motivating students to write journals, diaries, logs, and reminiscence pieces. Samples of teacher/student writing and art work to use for writing assignments are included. (AEA)

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CONFRONTING IDENTITY CRISES IN WRITING ACTIVITIES: HOW MIDDLE AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS OF WRITING CAN HELP THEIR STUDENTS COPE WITH PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY

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National Council of Teachers of English, November 23, 1979, San Francisco, California, on the program: "Helping Middle and Junior High School Learners Cope with Problems of Identity" (C.4).

When I was eleven years old, I moved from a little town in Western Kansas, in the middle of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, to an affluent suburb on Chicago's North Side. For six years I had lived in a modest parsonage behind the Ford garage, not far from tracks where desperate men hopped off and on the freights. I wore shoes most of the time, and, in a neighborhood of boys, climbed trees, dug caves, played ball, and refereed war games. My new acquaintances in Evanston had perms and formals, wore heels to dancing school, shopped in shoppes, and had live-in maids. In the transition, I suffered an identity crisis.

For a while I wrote long letters to the kids back home. I started a diary. During homework time in English class, I wrote pomes. In these and other ways I struggled, partly to

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find who I was or might become, partly to sustain the I I thought I was or wanted to be, and, only later, to win recognition. Several teachers helped, including Miss Wolliver, the English teacher who never interfered. And Winifred Ward, who taught creative dramatics. And Lew Sarett, who read us his poems--published poems.

I found my coping strategy the day my story, "The Tornado," appeared in the school magazine. I was no longer just that kid from Out West who "talks funny"; I was Helen, who had huddled in terror while a twister dipped from the skies and took its toll and lived to tell of it. And I was a writer, a published writer! Fortuitously if inadvertently, I had found the four "allies" that Sara Lundsteen suggests help kids cope: self-competency, personal acceptance, peer status, and models.[1]

While psychologists and other students of human behavior can provide much information about human development and personal needs, ways of coping, and causes and catastrophes associated with crises of identity, and while it is true that teachers can use this information as well as young adult fiction to help themselves become more sensitive and more responsive to problems students face, students themselves need a tool they can use by themselves, for themselves. Teachers can put such a tool within their reach. Writing is that tool.

In her analysis of twenty-three works of fiction for young adults, Nancy C. Millett has identified a number of ways that kids, like grown-ups, cope with problems of identity,

ranging all the way, she reports, from "self-centered behaviors to remarkable expressions of love for others."[2] Those characters who write, write diaries and real or "pretend" letters. Alone or with others they write or act out stories, dialogues, dreams, and fantasies. Clearly they value writing, and they write for and about themselves and, when occasion demands, or invites, to others who matter to them.

Many young people in real life value writing, too, and they write for and about themselves, and oftentimes to or for others. What they write most seriously or frequently, when they write, is not necessarily school writing, though. In her study of The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Janet Emig found that the students she observed treated school writing dutifully or diffidently.[3] But writing they initiated for their reasons, for their purposes, mattered--in the way, for example, that love letters matter. Through three wars now I have watched students of all ages compose love or loving letters to friends and fathers and boyfriends, some letters ten to twelve pages long, days or weeks in the making, with topic sentences, and beginnings and middles and ends, and copious details, and extensive development--and during those very weeks turn in "themes" with few or none of the above. More recently I have been reading journals and anthologies of student writing and marveled at young writers' uses of language, at their fluency and flair, at their unswerving honesty.

Consequently, I have come to believe that teaching

writing, <u>really</u> teaching writing, means enabling and encouraging kids to write about what for them are genuine matters of consequence; means freeing them from timidity and false constraints so that they may find and bespeak themselves. As Larry Levinger has put it:

> Writing is an act of self discovery that engages the deepest elements of identity.

For this reason, he maintains:

> In the teaching of writing we are concerned first with the relationship between student and self.

Teaching writing this way requires some re-ordering of priorities for some of us, but it does not threaten cherished composition goals. Levinger reconciles what may appear to be diverse or diverging means with goals of skills and literacy as he continues:

> For the writing student, literacy is achieved when the continuity of self is articulated well. The skills so vital to this process are not confined to the pages of texts; nor do they rest solely as a body of knowledge within the minds of teachers. Human beings are born with them; the impulse to speak, to make language, is natural . . . When we consider the writing problem, we must remind ourselves that writing has origins independent of the educational process.[4]

That origin, he tells us, is <u>voice</u>. In young writers' oral and scribal compositions, found in fiction and in actual diaries and journals, letters and notes, graffiti and poems, we

hear, if our ears are closely attuned, authentic voices articulating self and continuity of self, at once seeking and proclaiming identity.

How are we to really teach writing, then? Considering not just a student but a human need for models, self-competence, and peer status, I propose we begin by modeling. If we learn nothing else from the experience of professional writers working with youth (and indeed we can learn a great deal more), we learn how effectively modeling motivates and reassures. In Poets in the Schools: A Handbook, Michael True reports the following responses from students.

From a Colorado twelve-year old:

> I saw how the poet loves his work and is devoted to it. That helped me think a lot about what I do.

From a Texas fifteen-year-old:

> I liked the attitude the poet had toward us, making us all feel we were friends.

From a Massachusetts fifteen-year-old:

> I didn't know so many people wrote. I used to write, but I wouldn't show it to anybody. Now I have a lot of people to share my poems with.

And from a nine-year-old in Georgia:

> The poetry lady is like somebody who spilled poetry all over herself.[5]

No matter whether we write for others or simply for ourselves, the important thing is that you and I write, too. We can discover anew our selves, we can confirm our identities, we can

confront our problems. We, too, can wield the tool. We may even resurrect our stifled personal commitments and restore our jaded love affair with teaching and the young.

Certainly it seems to me that all these experiences must have taken place before, and as, and after Eleanor Kaplin, teacher, Long Island City, P.S. 76 wrote this, her first poem, during a writing workshop conducted by Art Berger:

METAPHOR
-1-

Dear Mr. Berger
Here is my poem
And my metaphor:
Teacher.
Common Branches.
A poem may disturb
What took seven years.
May let in a little light
May jire and jumble my waves...
I'd rather not, Mr. Berger,
Break this closed circuit;
Go back to when words
Were not weapons
But whirled like tots
Round and round
And feel the rhymes and rhythms
Bringing rewards.
Words are now alphabetical
Phonics'd and prefixed

Their meaning in dictionaries
Any school child knows that!
Seven years I've been pulling down the shades
And you say, open the door a crack!
You are naive to believe
I want to fade out
Of a part so long played
I have become the star.

-2-

My new name was born in Brownsville
I came wailing and thrashing
To a deaf-blind world.
I was malformed
There was no place for heart
I said
"Donna Atkins, sit up straight.
The psychologist is coming in ten months
To tell you, you are brain damaged.
Alvin Cruz, remember to do your homework,
If you can find a home.
Roberto Garcia, bring two pencils every day
To erase your sullen face.
Richard Felton, a 3rd grader mustn't come late
When you can't read a word tho you're 4 + 8.
Freida Mosley, stand on line
Your daddy's home drinking wine
Your mother's gone, sister too

I don't want to hear a word out of you.
Johnny Pimental, speak out nice and loud
So we can all hear the terror in your voice.
Marvin Bowers, you are very cooperative
But why did you have to make bookcovers
For the whole class out of newspaper
When your mother is rotting in Kings County Hospital."

-3-

I stood in the corner
They all weighed in
When the bell rang.
I lost
I wrote 100 times
"School is a hard lesson to learn."[6]

The teacher who really teaches writing is perhaps as concerned with the relationship between teacher and self as between teacher and student, and student and self, and, when writing toward discovery, too, in modeling motivates and reassures--and allies with--the young.

To help students find those other allies--self-competence, personal acceptance, and peer status, I suggest further that we create a context for composing. The first dimension of such a context is psychological, comprised in large measure of personal writing, writing for and about oneself, taking the form of what we may call <u>celebrations</u>. The first of these is one that may be quite familiar: the name poem, or acrostic.

It is one of the first writing activities I ever shared with students, and it worked in ways I could never have predicted. My discovery of it came by fortunate coincidence.

The day before a new semester was to begin, I received a copy of The Whole Word Catalog, a special issue of the newsletter published by the Teachers' and Writers' Collaborative. TWC places professional writers in schools to work with teachers and students, and portions of these writers' diaries, along with the students' work, appear in the project's publications. It was in The Whole Word Catalog that I met Matthew Mandelbaum, 5th grade, New York City, P.S. 75. Buoyantly, Matthew introduces himself:

(Acrostic)

Most marvelous music maker
At all times
Though
The
Horrible
Eky
Water falls on the piano.

Matthew has
A
Nice
Diddle-
Ee-do
Life
Because he has
A

"U"

In his

Marvelous name.[7]

(Is it by accident or design, I wonder, that he spreads "U" and "In his" over two lines, thereby incorporating "I" in his "marvelous name.")

The next morning I walked into my first class with student teachers, sheets of drawing paper and colored markers in hand. As I distributed the paper, the markers, "Take a sheet or two, and pick a color you like." Then, "Now write your name vertically down the left-hand side." Giggles, raised eyebrows, chatter, and bustle.

One look at the work of that marvelous music maker and they were off and running. More giggles, momentarily-furrowed brows, then chuckles, marker-swapping, peeking. Twenty minutes later we were posting our pages on the walls with masking tape and crowding around to read each others' productions. Much admiration, much praise. Somewhat to my surprise, and much to my relief, the activity had "worked"--even with these sophisticated college seniors and graduates. Even though, as someone said, "Matthew is a hard act to follow." When we discussed what we had done, I heard comments like the following:

"Good ice-breaker."

"I enjoyed it."

"I didn't think I could do it, but I did."

"I'm going to try another one."

"Think I'll do one for my wife (or child, or friend)." That was that. Or so I thought.

Over the next few weeks I visited my student teachers' classrooms. Without exception they had used the activity to begin their own classes. They were as exuberant and astonished as I at the results. Every student in every class had made a "poem." Some used only a first name; some did not tell anything about themselves but told a story; and all voluntarily posted their work. Moreover, they one-upped us; some pieces they adorned with scripts and curlicues, butterflies, blossoms, or other curiosities. For weeks I read name-poems in classrooms, that proud the kids were, that willing to share their work with me, a relative stranger. Occasionally one would point out another's name poem: "See what Kip did? Isn't that neat?" while Kip flushed with pride. For weeks I heard teachers say things like, "First thing that fellow ever tried to write in this class," or "First time that girl ever finished anything."

Since that time I have seen this activity repeated many times with students from 3rd grade through graduate courses, and repeated it myself. I have yet to see or hear of a person who didn't do something with it, either at the moment, or, if inspiration faltered, an hour or a day later. In Man's Search for Himself, Rollo May provides an observation that may help to explain its sure success:

> After all, the experience of one's own identity, or becoming a person, is the simplest experience in life

> even though it is at the same time the most profound. As everyone knows, a little child will react indignantly and strongly if you, in teasing, call him by the wrong name. It is as though you take away his identity--a most precious thing to him. In the Old Testament the phrase "I will blot out their names"--to erase their identity and it will be as though they never had existed--is a more powerful threat even than death.[8]

A word about the quality of the acrostics. Some, of course, are perceived to be "better" than others, in the sense that they achieve greater continuity or make use of images or puns or adept turns-of-phrase. But no one in my hearing has ever said, "Hers (or his) is better than mine." "Mine" is, after all, intimately mine; my name is me!

As name games (or "compositions," if you will, for compositions they are), acrostics celebrate the self. This is one reason why they appeal to young and old alike. I think there is another reason why they so intrigue: they allow for, and often stimulate, genuine artfulness. They can be drawn and colored and illustrated; they can be arranged typographically and exhibited, word-portraits, nothing less. They visually appeal.

Other forms of visual composition that describe or define and celebrate the self are similarly appealing. Many teachers have used cartoon and comic strip "balloons" stripped of the original dialogue to encourage students to compose dia-

logue or invent stories. Students may use balloons of other kinds to frame their celebrations. Several years ago Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (3M) issued visual masters from their Meeting Brightener Series #1, a variety of forms featuring cartoon characters and charts and maps to help business or industrial or other salespersons enhance their visual representations. White spaces accompanying a trumpeter "Announcing," an open scroll, a telephone, and one or more cartoon characters in provocative poses are fields or frames for students' acrostics or other compositions.

[Figures 1-6]

One of the more popular visual compositions is the coat-of-arms, or shield. One model appears in Writing for Personal Growth by Robert Hawley, Sidney Simon, and D. D. Britton. A shield with six sectors invites the student to draw in one sector a picture to represent an important event or achievement; in another, a picture to express "the happiest moment in an average day"; and so on. In one sector the student is asked to write.[9]

[Figure 7]

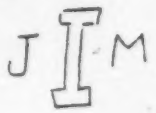
A teacher, or a teacher with students, or students themselves can select other options, depending upon their purposes or preferences.

This activity can be modified by using sheets of newsprint that students illustrate to show hobbies, interests, friends, family, or experiences, then wear about the classroom like sandwich boards. However presented, arranging objects

and words gives kids a chance to formulate and articulate autobiographical information, or personal expectations, or near or distant goals.

Yet another kind of visual composition is the concrete poem. Show students three or four examples of concretisms like those found in Mary Ellen Solt's Concrete Poetry: A World View,[10] for example, or in many popular publications, and they will go to it. "I can do that!"

What students compose on their own may not turn out to be celebrations; but, then again, they may, as in this composition by an eighth grader:



Concretisms do seem to impel kids to try and enable them to succeed.

With visual compositions we can display the work of all our students, turning classrooms into composition galleries. As we help kids learn to use language freely, expressively, proudly; as we allow, even encourage, sharing; as we celebrate their celebrations by posting or publishing them; and as we share with them our celebrations, we create a physical context for composing conducive to personal growth.

If these activities and the context I propose suggest only a moderately bustling classroom, any teacher can intensify the activity by setting up easels on which are mounted

pads of newsprint where students can write declarations or messages or graffiti. And ask each student to design a folder for filing compositions. Any teacher willing to risk success just may come up with an instance of what has been referred to as "turning a problem (in this case, social processes) into a solution (in this case, personal productivity)."

This is only a beginning, of course, in the direction of _really_ teaching writing. But beginnings beget; and students and teacher-people who compose celebrations usually welcome other invitations to bespeak themselves. Most students, for example, hugely enjoy working in pairs or in small groups to compose actual or invented dialogue. Writing, then reading or acting out dialogue provides a social as well as physical context for composing, much as galleries and publications do. So also do other collaborations, as when students invent or fantasize persons and places and worlds or parts of worlds. Richard Murphy's _Imaginary Worlds_ is a stunning example of student collaborations in one class.[11]

Writing journals, diaries, and logs, many kids for the first time--or for the first time _freely_--voice or probe problems or situations in which they perceive themselves to be divided or whole, accepted or rejected, winners or losers. Writing about their dreams, they listen and respond to inner voices. By no means are all dreams dark; some are joyful, and many downright zany, the stuff of fantasy and fiction brought home. In _Wishes, Lies, and Dreams_, Kenneth Koch even suggests some ways we can help kids articulate their _day_dreams.[12]

Writing memory pieces, snippets--not statistical biographies--gives us a chance to reminiscence about old friends, odd aunts, eccentric uncles, moments or phases of remembered pleasure or pain, or times when we had to make tough choices or live with others' choices. Gives a chance, too, to recollect and ponder "the way we were."

Writing reminiscence may lead to letter writing, sometimes to seek information, sometimes to explain. Letters that can't be delivered because the recipient is dead or missing or imaginary can be written as poems.

Through reading, we discover the world. Through writing, we may discover our selves and our place in that world, for in composing our experiences, truly, we compose ourselves.

Sincerely yours,

Helen (drop the J.) Throckmorton

for whom

Hope is an
Elephant
Lumbering in my life: an endemic beast of
Epidemic proportion, which
Nevertheless I have come to

Trust, and would not want to do without. In this
incarnation
Hope can hardly be said to sp-
Ring. On the contrary, looms, can scarcely be hidden

or hidden from, and, despite an elegant legendary
graveyard somewhere, refuses to die or be
Killed.
Moreover, elephants have been
Observed up-
Rooting baobabs.
This is reassuring and makes having
One around, however burdensome,
Nice.

Notes

[1]Sara W. Lundsteen, ed., Help for the Teacher of Written Composition (K-9): New Directions in Research (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1976), pp. 29-33.

[2]Nancy C. Millett, "Large as Life: Fiction about How 10-16 Year-old Characters Cope." Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, 1979, p. 2.

[3]Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1971).

[4]Larry Levinger, "The Human Side of Illiteracy," English Journal, Vol. 67, No. 8, November 1978, p. 26.

[5]Michael True, Poets in the Schools: A Handbook (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1976), p. 3.

[6]Eleanor Kaplin, "Metaphor." In Art Berger, "Poet as Teacher--Teacher as Poet," English Journal, Vol. 62, No. 9, December 1973, pp. 1242-3.

[7]Matthew Mandelbaum, (Acrostic). In The Whole World Catalog, ed. Rosellen Brown et al. Special issue of Teachers' and Writers' Collaborative Newsletter, Vol. 4, No. 3, Summer 1972, p. 90.

[8]Rollo May, Man's Search for Himself (New York: Dell, 1953), p. 92.

[9]Robert C. Hawley, Sidney B. Simon, and D. D. Britton, Composition for Personal Growth (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 57-8.

[10]Mary Ellen Solt, ed., Concrete Poetry: A World View (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

[11]Richard Murphy, Imaginary Worlds: Notes on a New Curriculum (New York: Virgil Books, 1974).

[12]Kenneth Koch, Wishes, Lies, and Dreams (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

FIGURES

Figure 1

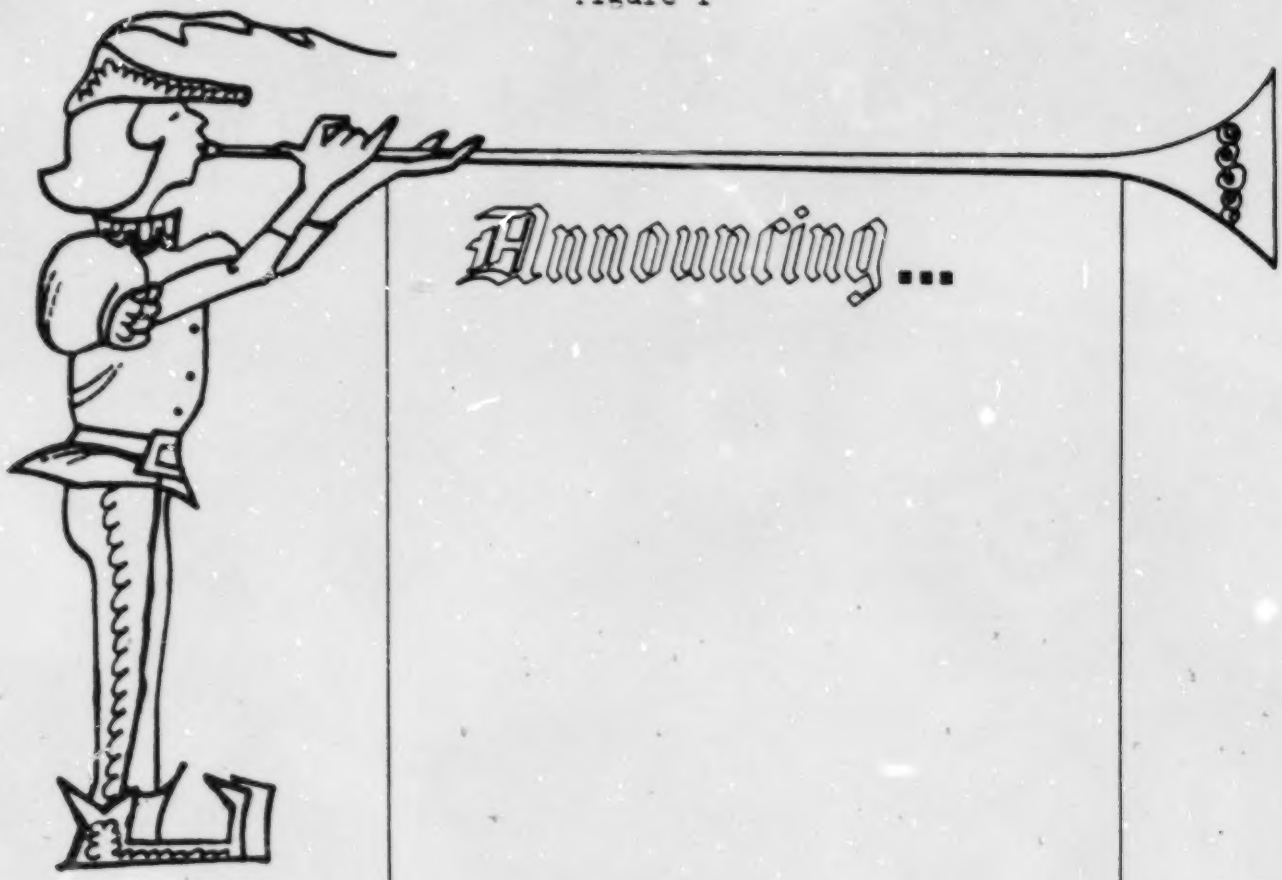


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Figure 2

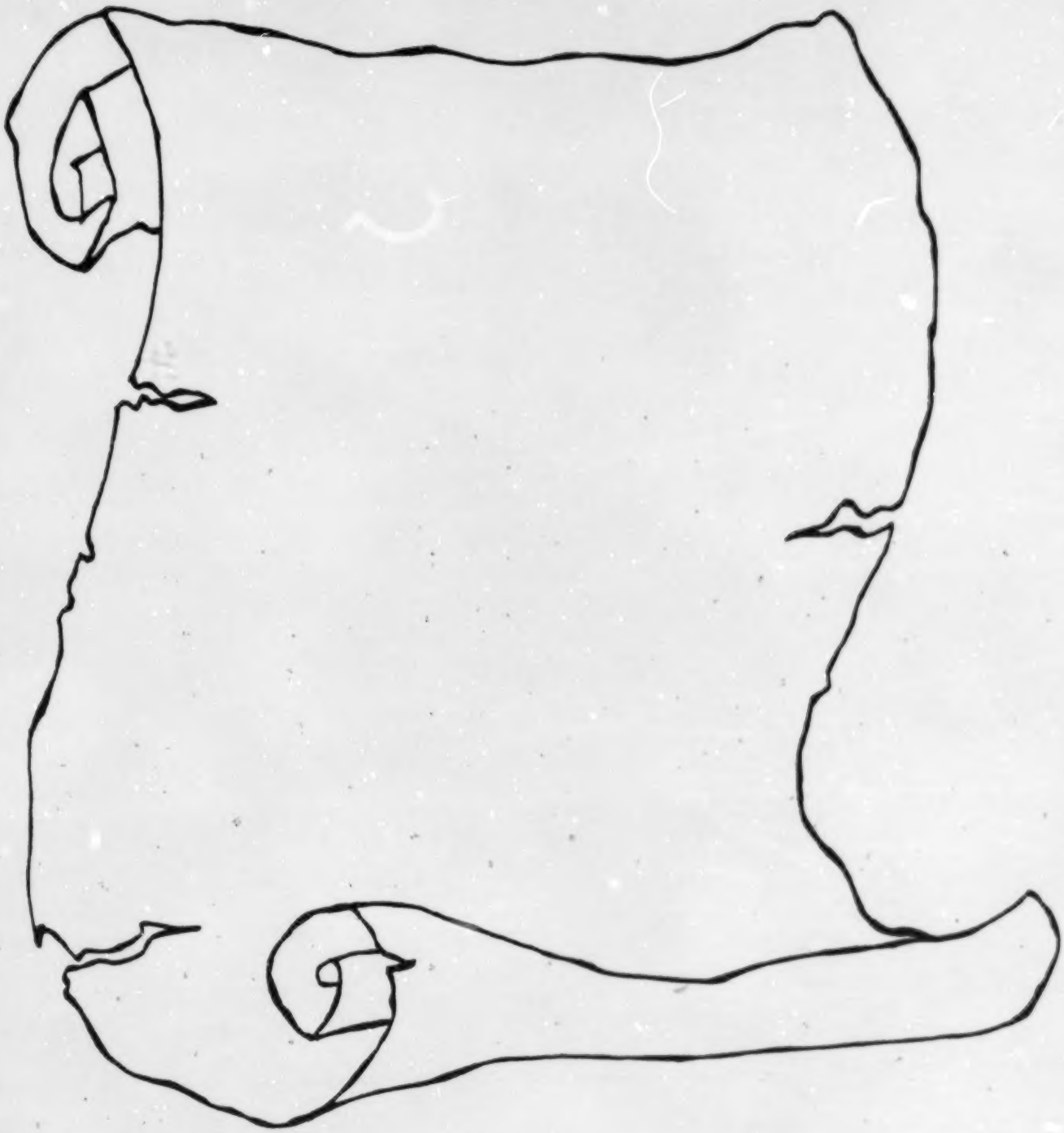

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Figure 3

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Figure 4

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Figure 5

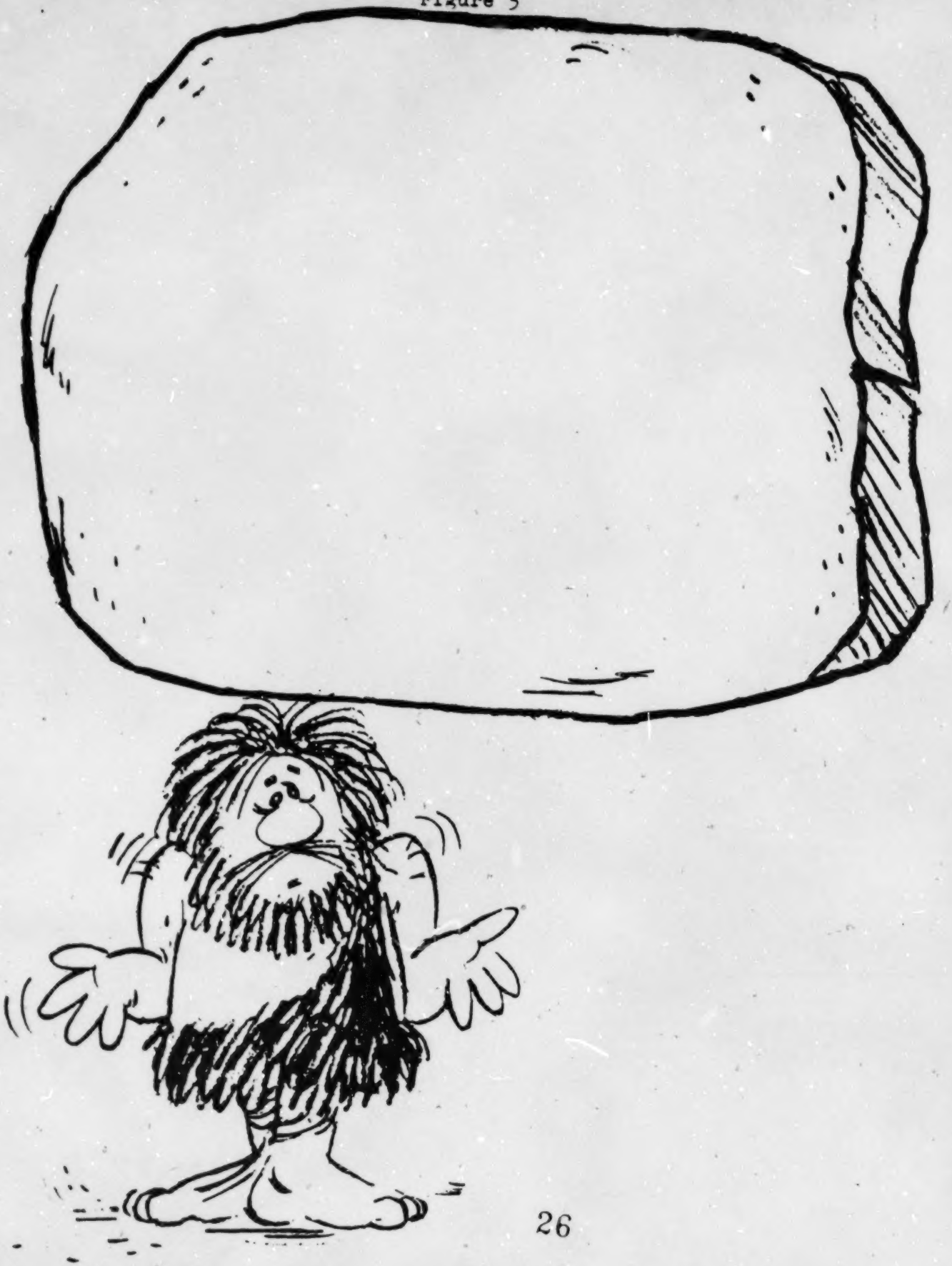

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Figure 6

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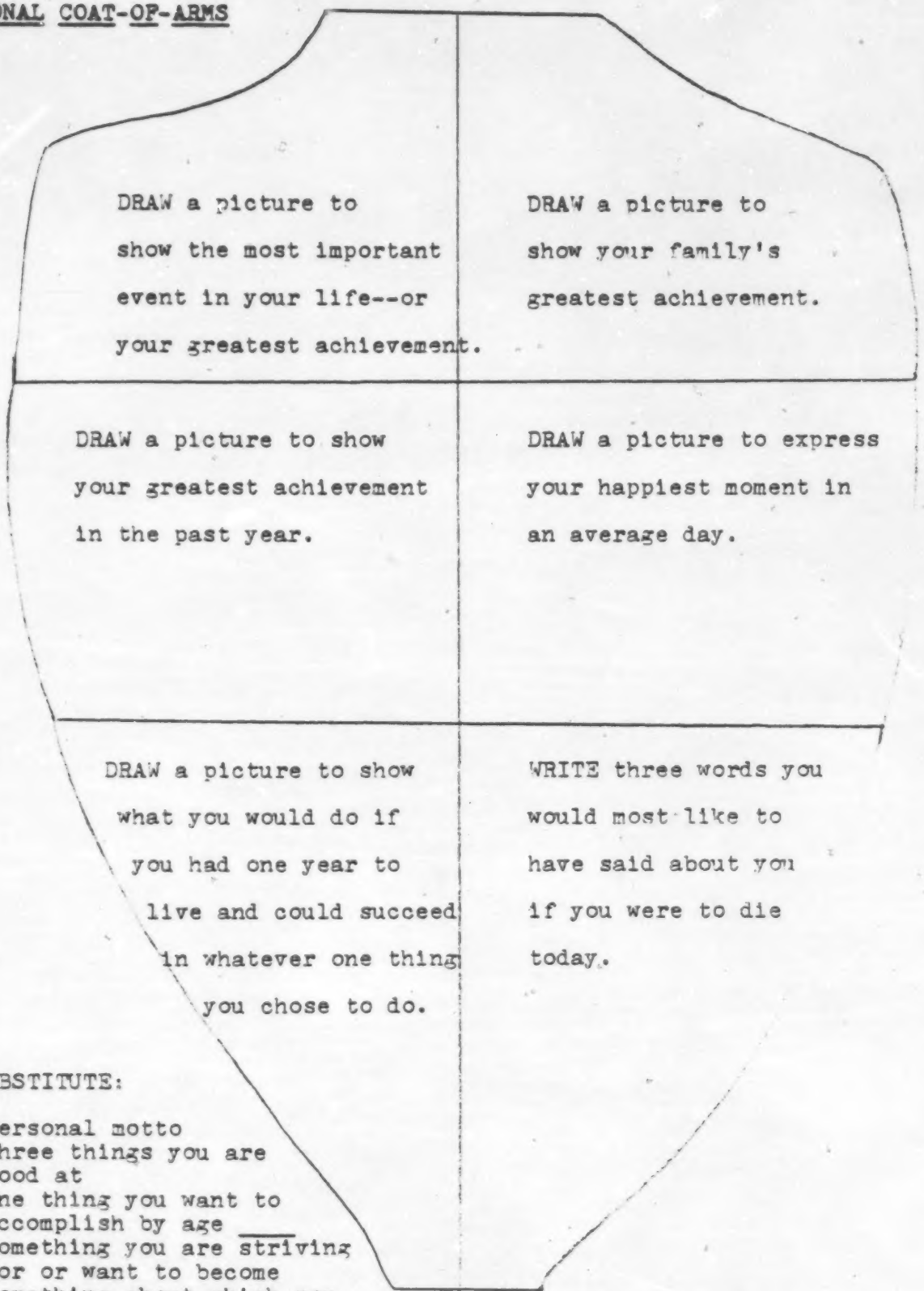
Figure 7

PERSONAL COAT-OF-ARMS


DRAW a picture to show the most important event in your life--or your greatest achievement.
DRAW a picture to show your family's greatest achievement.
DRAW a picture to show your greatest achievement in the past year.
DRAW a picture to express your happiest moment in an average day.
DRAW a picture to show what you would do if you had one year to live and could succeed in whatever one thing you chose to do.
WRITE three words you would most like to have said about you if you were to die today.

OR SUBSTITUTE:

1. Personal motto
2. Three things you are good at
3. One thing you want to accomplish by age ____
4. Something you are striving for or want to become
5. Something about which you will never budge!

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

AND

SELECTED SOURCES FOR SPECIAL KINDS OF WRITING

Materials distributed to participants

Session C.4

National Council of Teachers of English

San Francisco, California

November 23, 1979

CONFRONTING IDENTITY CRISES IN WRITING ACTIVITIES: HOW MIDDLE AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS OF WRITING CAN HELP THEIR STUDENTS COPE WITH PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY

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National Council of Teachers of English, November 23, 1979, San Francisco, California, on the program: "Helping Middle and Junior High School Learners Cope with Problems of Identity."

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SELECTED SOURCES FOR SPECIAL KINDS OF WRITING

Although many of the references listed in the Selected Bibliography include descriptions and examples of many kinds of writing, for the teacher who would like to try teaching one particular kind I have listed below at least one source for each. Categories, of course, overlap. In these, as well as in the bibliography, you will also find many suggestions to help you plan activities, fit them into other writing--and reading--activities, organize writing groups and centers and workshops, and use a wide variety of materials and methods to display and publish students' writing.

Dialogue
- Writing to be Read, Chapter 6 "People Talking"
- Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13, Chapter 14 "Actual and Invented Dialogue"

Dream writing
- Whole Word Catalog 2, pp. 79-86. Bill Zavatsky, "Dream Workshop"

Fantasies and inventions
- The Whole Word Catalog, pp. 42-44. "Creating Worlds."
- Imaginary Worlds
- Common Sense Composition, pp. 105-106
- Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13. Chapter 15 "Invented Stories"

Images and metaphors
- The Whole Word Catalog 2, pp. 120-124. Alan Ziegler, "Participatory Pieces: Getting into Images"

Journals, logs, and diaries
- Writing to be Read, Chapter 16 "Keeping a Journal"
- Common Sense Composition, pp. 77-79
- Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13, pp. 320-327

Letter writing
- The Whole Word Catalog 2, Section B. "Letters and Dialogues," pp. 126-137
- Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13, pp. 327-328

Memories
- Introduction: Writing about Ourselves and Others
  - Autobiographies: Writing to be Read, Chapter 11 "Remembering Childhood" and Wishes, Lies, and Dreams
  - Memoirs: Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13, pp. 342-349

Imaginative and practical ideas for displaying and publishing students' writing appear in The Whole Word Catalog, pp. 49-80 (Sheila Murphy, "Materials"), in The Whole Word Catalog 2, pp. 228-252, and in Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13, pp. 150-153.